

Nest Boxes for Native Birds

Housing Shortages and Wildlife

Australia is currently experiencing a housing shortage, not just for people, but for wildlife too. Many of our birds and other animals rely on tree hollows to live and breed in, but trees with hollows are a dwindling resource. Hollows only form in very old trees — at least 100 years old — so with widespread clearing for farming, timber production or development, many old, hollow-bearing trees are simply not there any more. How can we help? By planting more trees for the future and stopping clearance of old trees, but in the meantime we can erect nest boxes to replace tree hollows.

All Shapes and Sizes

Tree hollows, and therefore nest boxes, are used by a wide variety of birds, from tiny Striated Pardalotes and Tree Martins up to Powerful Owls, and including most parrots, and by many mammals as well, such as phascogales, gliders, bats and possums. As they come in all different shapes and sizes and have different specific requirements, no nest box will suit them all, so you will have to choose carefully which wildlife you want to attract, and tailor your nest box to suit. Don't put up any old nest box and hope for the best.

Grand Designs

The different specific requirements of our wildlife necessitate that nest boxes are specially designed to incorporate essential features that mimic the characteristics of their natural nesting hollows. For example, most cockatoos and rosellas need a hollow or nest box which is vertical, while other parrots often prefer theirs to be sloping, and kingfishers, including kookaburras, prefer hollows or nest boxes that are horizontal. Welcome Swallows readily use a simple shelf situated below the eaves of a building. The size of the nest box is usually determined by the size of the bird you are hoping will nest in it. Pardalotes require long, thin nest boxes which mimic the narrow branches in which they often nest, while nesting boxes for kookaburras, ducks and cockatoos are much larger. The entrance hole also needs to suit the size of its intended inhabitant — a large hole for large birds, and a smaller one for small birds.

Nest boxes can be made of a variety of natural and artificial materials. The best are natural hollow branches or logs attached to a tree, but it is vital that you do not collect these from the wild, where it is probably already being used by another native animal. Hollows are sometimes available from local councils or tree loppers who have removed them from suburban parks or gardens. If none is available, it may be more feasible to make a nest box from sawn wood. It is, of course, best to use recycled wood, such as off-cuts or plywood, or plantation-grown wood, rather than using unsustainably harvested timber. The timber should be thick enough to be sturdy and to provide adequate insulation for the eggs, chicks and the incubating birds. Other materials are also useful, as some species will readily use nest boxes made from PVC piping, but because of the smooth internal surface, it is essential to include some chicken wire or a piece of rough wood to enable the inhabitants to climb in and out. No matter which material you decide to use, make sure that all gaps are filled to exclude draughts.

Location, Location, Location

Once you have decided on the design of the nest box, the next important decision is where to put it. It should be placed: at least two metres above the ground, but at a height where it can be monitored easily (see below); out of the prevailing wet-weather winds, in the shade or semi-shade; and near sources of food and water. The nest box should be fixed securely to the trunk or a sturdy branch of the tree, either by using plastic-covered wire, an old garden hose or a chain, or using nails and strips of galvanised steel. Be sure to monitor the tree over time to make sure that the wire or metal strips do not ringbark the tree as it grows.

Australia's Most Unwanted

A number of familiar introduced species, especially the Common Myna, Common Starling and House Sparrow all nest in tree hollows, and they will happily use nest boxes intended for native birds or mammals. They tend to be very aggressive around nest sites, and Mynas have been recorded driving nesting birds away and tossing their eggs and nestlings from hollows or nest boxes, or even building their nest on top of other birds' nests, crushing the eggs or smothering the nestlings. They are ruthless competitors for nest boxes. The best way to stop them from using your nest box is to place a special barrier or baffle in front of the entrance to prevent the bird from flying directly to the hole; parrots usually climb to the entrance rather than fly to it, and so are unaffected. A design for the Anti-Myna Baffle is included in the information sheet on advanced nest box design. If unwanted introduced birds start to use your nest box, the best thing to do is remove the nest material that they have added. You must be persistent (removing it perhaps several times a day), as some species will keep trying to nest in the box for several days before eventually moving to another site.

Honey bees may take over your nest box to use as their hive. This is a surprisingly common occurrence, and they should be removed with great caution, preferably by someone who knows what they are doing. Contact your local council or a local apiarist (bee-keeper) for assistance.

Rats may also pose a problem, either by nesting in the nest box, or by eating the eggs and nestlings of birds using the nest box. The easiest way to combat this is to set up a collar on the trunk of the tree to prevent the rats climbing up to the box. Removing rats already in a nest box should only be done with great caution.

Nest box checklist

- *Choose the species you want to nest in your garden*
- *Make sure the nest box is suitable for that species in terms of size, shape and entrance*
- *Choose an appropriate site, out of the wet-weather winds, and in shade or semi-shade*
- *Attach it securely*
- *Ensure it is not usurped by unwanted introduced species*
- *Enjoy the experience of interacting with and assisting our native wildlife*